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Media Contact:
Sandra Arnold or Isidro Reyna
(409) 766-3004
swgpao@usace.army.mil
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USACE Galveston District monitors Gulf for signs of cold-stunning

SOUTH PADRE ISLAND, Texas (Feb. 9, 2011) – The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Galveston District's Operations Division and Environmental Branch are closely monitoring the Gulf of Mexico water temperatures in South Texas for signs of sea turtle "cold-stunning."

"Cold-stunning refers to sea turtles becoming immobile due to a dramatic decrease in water and air temperatures," said Alicia Rea, a project operations manager with the Galveston District. "With Gulf temperatures expected to dip into the 30s locally this evening, marine life including sea turtles may be affected by the 'wintry threat'."

According to Rea, monitoring the Gulf of Mexico for signs of cold-stunning is imperative, as the Galveston District is currently performing dredge work on the Brownsville ship and jetty channels. Dredge work began Feb. 8 and the Corps has taken proactive measures by monitoring operations and will continue to do so after the cold front passes.

"We've implemented a variety of precautionary measures to monitor our sea turtle population," said Lisa Finn, a physical scientist with the Galveston District's Environmental Branch. "Specifically, we monitor the weather forecast and water temperatures at observation stations, alert the dredge contractor to the potential for occurrence of cold-stunned turtles after a cold front and coordinate with the Sea Turtle Stranding and Salvage Network and National Marine Fisheries Service."

According to Finn, unofficial counts from the STSSN indicate an unprecedented 1,200 sea turtles were cold-stunned in the Laguna Madre area last week.

"The Corps keeps environmental considerations at the forefront when it undertakes the design, construction and execution of projects that are crucial to keeping the nation's waterways safe for navigation," said Rea.

According to Rea, dredged material from the Brownsville ship and jetty channels will be placed on Padre Island as part of a beneficial use beach renourishment project. Following completion of the dredging and beach renourishment, the dredge will move to Port Mansfield to complete dredge work there.

The Corps awarded a contract Dec. 8 to Great Lakes Dredge & Dock Company to dredge the Brownsville Ship Channel in Cameron County, Texas. Work is scheduled to be completed by March 1 in order to avoid both the turtle nesting season and spring break.

The Texas General Land Office and City of South Padre Island partnered to contribute \$2,769,600 in a non-federal cost share initiative to renourish approximately one mile of beach using beach-quality sand harvested from the dredging process.

The \$6 million contract is being administered by the Galveston District's Brownsville Resident Office.

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U.S. ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS – GALVESTON DISTRICT

2000 Fort Point Road, Galveston, Texas, 77550

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